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ABSTRACT

This paper defines "adventure-based intervention," "young people," and "trouble and risk" in light of the therapeutic work done at Bryn Melyn Community (Bala, Wales), a therapeutic treatment center. Bryn Melyn provides intensive individualized therapy to young people, aged 15-18, who are in the care of social services departments. Each teenager has an individualized program involving cycles of adventure abroad and consolidation/preparation in Wales. During adventure phases of up to 90 days, each client and a therapeutic "guide" pursue an adventure activity of the client's choice in a new environment conducive to emotional and behavioral change. This intervention engages the teenager, fosters development of a very close client-therapist relationship, and offers conditions within which change can begin. The special nature of adolescence lies in its position as the first life stage in which an individual must review or recycle previous life stages and their outcomes. Poor outcomes of earlier stages, such as lack of trust, lack of self-control, and feelings of inferiority, are found among many young people identified as at-risk. These young people share such characteristics as past physical or sexual abuse, neglect or abandonment, dysfunctional families, multiple placements, and resulting offending behaviors. Bryn Melyn's innovative adventure-based intervention engages young people where other approaches have failed, and is effective in altering attitudes and behaviors, as demonstrated by a low rate of offenses among program completers. Includes a chart of Eriksons's eight life stages and favorable and unfavorable outcomes. (SV)

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ADVENTURE AS THERAPY:
USING ADVENTURE AS PART OF THERAPEUTIC PROGRAMMES
WITH YOUNG PEOPLE IN TROUBLE AND AT RISK

Brendan McNutt

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Adventure as Therapy:
Using Adventure as part of Therapeutic Programmes with Young People in Trouble and At Risk

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Brendan is the founder and Principal of the Bryn Melyn Community, a therapeutic treatment centre working with individual young people whose life experiences have left them with serious emotional, psychological and behavioural difficulties. Adventure experiences form a major part of therapeutic programmes at Bryn Melyn.

Introduction

If we look at the conference title "Adventure-based interventions with young people in trouble and at risk", we can easily identify three areas where it is essential to define meaning. A good way to do this is simply to ask:-

What is an adventure-based intervention?
How do we define young people?
How do we recognise and define trouble and risk?

These are questions with which we are familiar at Bryn Melyn Community and examination of these definitions has provided us with a theoretical background to inform and structure our work. Before attempting to answer these questions it will be useful for me to say something about the nature and context of the work done at Bryn Melyn in order to bring the following discussion into focus.

Bryn Melyn Community

Bryn Melyn Community provides an Intensive Therapeutic Service for young people aged between 15 years and 18 years old who are being "looked after" by local authority social services departments. Typically these young people have been sexually or physically abused (sometimes both), psychologically or emotionally traumatised, neglected or abandoned. They have very often moved through a succession of placements in the "care" career and they represent the most seriously emotionally damaged young people in the country. Manifestations of this damage to their normal development take the form of: offending behaviour, absconding, destructive actions, self-harm and frequent challenges to authority figures.

When a young person joins Bryn Melyn Community they go to work straight away with their own individual worker or guide. Their first joint task is to identify the aims and objectives of their own Individual Therapeutic Programme. To do this they have the help of our consultant psychotherapist, our holistic therapist and our experienced care staff.

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After a preparation period of up to 4 weeks the young person and guide are ready to engage in their individual project. This involves some form of adventure which usually takes place abroad and lasts for 13 weeks during which time young person and guide live together in basic conditions for 24 hours per day, seven days per week, for 90 days continuously.

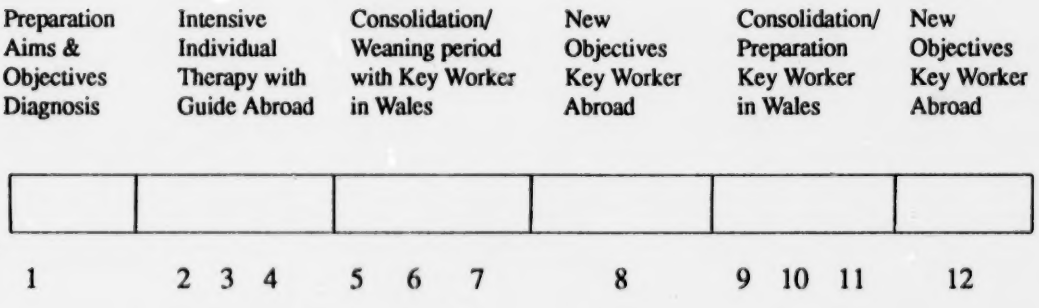
At the end of this adventure there is a further period of 90 days back in Wales during which a Key Worker takes over responsibility for the young person who is "weaned off" the dependency relationship with the project Guide. At the end of this second 3-month period the Key Worker accompanies the young person on another therapeutic adventure - this time of one month's duration. Throughout these Intensive Therapeutic Programmes there is a parallel process going on between the adventure associated with the physical activity and the therapeutic adventure of going into emotional and psychological areas which have previously been "no-go" areas. This process is made possible by the physical conditions created by the adventure activity but especially by the high level of confrontation with which the guide approaches the young person.

Whilst the young person's psychological and emotional discounts are being confronted both s/he and the guide are engaged in activity in a new and novel environment which provides the opportunity for the young person to develop new responses to situations. Success in doing this will lead to a marked increase in self-esteem. This work can be built around almost any activity. *Figure 1 represents the programme timetable over one year.*

Fig. 1

BRYN MELYN - INTENSIVE INDIVIDUAL THERAPEUTIC PROGRAMME

ONE YEAR TIMETABLE



So the adventure-based intervention that we use with young people can be designed around any activity that the young person expresses a willingness to engage in. In the past these have included mountaineering in the Pyrenees, trekking in the Atlas mountains, canoeing in the South of France, cycling through France, rock-climbing in Spain, sailing across the Atlantic, video film-making in Egypt, trekking through East Africa, swimming with Dolphins in Ireland and Israel, pony trekking in Devon, surfing in Portugal, diving in Turkey and building work in France. The most important common themes in all these activities are that they:

1. bring client and guide together in a very close relationship for 24 hours per day, 7 days per week, for a duration of 90 days initially;

2. provide adventure and opportunity and structure time so that therapy can happen within the relationship built around the activity;

3. usually take place abroad so that the young person can not easily run away from high levels of confrontation on emotional, psychological and behavioural levels;

4. are conducted in a climate which is conducive to success and which provides a comfortable and safe working environment.

These programmes are selected interventions of an adventurous nature with young people who are experiencing trouble and risk in their lives, which brings us back to the conference title and examination of the questions asked early on.

What is an adventure-based intervention?

When we intervene, we come into a young person's life as an extraneous influence and if we offer adventure we hold out the promise of something exciting, daring, involving risk. This is a new opportunity which we offer to people and, in return for adventure, a change of place, environment, living conditions and responsibilities, we expect new responses and new patterns of behaviour. We are attempting to provide the conditions conducive to effecting change in an individual.

Of course, an individual will only change if s/he wants to change. Our basic belief is that everybody is capable of change but our contractual starting point with any client is to ask the question - do you want to change? If the answer is "yes", we proceed; if the answer is "no", we part company before we start fighting each other.

One reason for using adventure-based activities is that they are often attractive to young people and our aim is to gain the co-operation of each teenager that we work with. If a person, young or old, is engaged in enjoyable activity s/he is far more likely to be receptive to anything else on the agenda whilst s/he experiences enjoyment. Our interventions need to be enjoyable otherwise the young people with whom we work, who have a paucity of inner strength and personal resources, would not engage in any part of the process. It also strikes me as obvious that if you are enjoying what you are doing, ie having fun (at least for some of the time), then success is more likely as an outcome than if the process if repugnant to you. Some of our critics can not reconcile the idea of having fun with the serious business of getting better or being "rehabilitated".

In a nutshell an adventure-based intervention at Bryn Melyn Community, centres around any activity which is to the young person adventurous, novel, sometimes risky, sometimes fun and always engaging. It provides opportunity, demands new responses from the teenager and offers the conditions within which change can begin to happen.

Of course, in order for this to happen we need to know as much as possible about the nature of the person we are working with. That brings us on to our next question.

What is a Young Person?

This may seem to be a strikingly obvious question to which we all know the answer - but do we?

Adolescence is a stage in life. It follows childhood and precedes adulthood. It is neither one or the other. It is a state or process within which a person is neither a child or an adult. For those of us who work with young people or adolescents our chances of success are considerably enhanced by understanding the special nature of what we call adolescence.

I particularly like Musgrove's (1964) thirty-year-old definition of adolescence, which holds industrial and post-industrial society responsible for its existence:

> "The adolescent as a distinct species is the creation of modern social attitudes and institutions. A creature neither child nor adult, he is a comparatively recent socio-psychological invention, scarcely two centuries old".

Musgrove's invitation to view adolescence from this perspective raises some interesting questions. Why should we as a society regard adolescence with such hostility, fear, misunderstanding and suspicion? Our own heritage of industrial development, our collective obsession with production and insatiable consumerism has given birth to what Truffaut encapsulated in his 1950s film, Rebel Without A Cause, the values of which were so lastingly personified by James Dean. Stormy, sullen, unsociable, disaffected, sometimes delinquent young people are here to stay and society has to own responsibility for creating the "species". Societies have given up or abandoned ancient rites of passage. Ritualistic and ceremonial "bridges" between childhood and adulthood are gone in most civilisations. It is interesting to note that many of the activities with which we in this room are concerned, take place in wilderness areas - exactly the sort of locations sought out by elders in traditional native cultures when working through rites of passage with their young men and women. The process that used to be guided and held as central and vital to growing up by the elder and more experienced members of a society is now presided over by a vast array of commercial interests and peer group support.

Peer group support and acceptance is critically important to an adolescent and generally exerts the strongest influence over the values, attitudes and behaviour of most youth. This is a fundamentally important consideration in designing any treatment programme for a young person. So far I have spoken in general terms about a condition of life known as adolescence. Most psycho-social models of human growth and development describe some process which we are to regard as "normal". Those of us gathered at this Conference know that the children with whom many of us work have become our clients *because* their development has not been "normal".

Adolescence is a life stage which is arrived at after having passed through several other stages. If we take the most influential of the available theories of human growth and development we can see from Erikson's work how one life stage prepares us for the next stage (Fig. 2).

Fig 2 **SYNOPSIS OF ERIKSON'S LIFE STAGES**

Life Crisis	Favourable Outcome	Unfavourable Outcome
1. 1st year		
Trust v. mistrust	Hope. Trust in the environment and the future.	Fear of the future; suspicion.
2. 2nd year		
Autonomy v. shame, doubt	Will. Ability to exercise choice as well as self-restraint; a sense of self-control and self esteem leading to good will and pride.	Sense of loss of self-control or sense of over-control; the result is a propensity for shame and doubt about whether one willed what one did or did what one willed.
3. 3rd - 5th yr		
Initiative v. guilt	Purpose. Ability to initiate activities, to give them direction, and to enjoy accomplishment.	Fear of punishment; self restriction or overcompensatory showing off.
4. 6th yr to Puberty		
Industry v. inferiority	Competence. Ability to relate to the world of skills and tools, to exercise dexterity and intelligence in order to make things and make them well.	A sense of inadequacy and inferiority.
5. Adolescence		
Identity v. confusion about one's role	Fidelity. Ability to see oneself as a unique and integrated person and to sustain loyalties.	Confusion over who one is.
6. Early Adulthood		
Intimacy v. isolation	Love. Ability to commit oneself, one's identity, to others.	Avoidance of commitments and love; distancing of oneself from others.
7. Middle Age		
Generativity v. resignation	Care. Widening concern for what has been generated by love, necessity or accident; for one's children, work or ideas.	Self-indulgence, boredom and interpersonal impoverishment.
8. Old Age		
Integrity v. despair	Wisdom. Detached concern for life; assurance of the meaning of life and of the dignity of one's own life; acceptance that one will die.	Disgust with life; despair over death.

If as an infant I do not resolve the emotional conflict between trust and distrust then I grow up afraid of the future and suspicious about those untrustworthy people who are around me and who are my significant teachers. When it comes to my next developmental task or conflict I am immediately at a disadvantage because fear and suspicion are not good predispositions at a time when I am attempting to develop freewill and self-esteem. I am more likely to feel ashamed, inadequate and over-controlled. The cumulative effects of inadequate or not good enough parenting are life determining experiences. We are all of us the products of our own childhood experiences. If those experiences were the product of good enough parenting then we are likely to develop into socially, psychologically, physically and culturally functioning adults. If those experiences are the product of inadequate or not good enough parenting then we are likely to grow up with some social, psychological, biological or cultural contamination which may lead to dysfunctional behaviour. If we then consider what effects abandonment, traumatic abuse, or neglect have upon this process we see that the likelihood of social, psychological, biological and cultural dysfunction are greatly increased.

So adolescence in the cases of most of the young people that we work with is not only the developmental limbo that all parents are familiar with. It is that first life stage when young people review or re-cycle for the first time in life all of their previous life stages. How confusing this must be for the adolescent who trusts nobody, who feels out of control, who knows no success, who feels inferior and who, to cap it all, has got no chance of developing a sense of identity because he or she doesn't even have a stable family to refer to in determining who they are.

This would be a very pessimistic analysis if it ended here. Sadly our national record in helping young people to overcome these handicaps is lamentably poor. There are, however, methods of repairing abusive and neglectful parenting but they require a great deal of skill, commitment, patience and understanding.

One of our fundamental principles at Bryn Melyn is that anybody can change and so we set out to provide the conditions which are most conducive to such transformation. It has been in dealing with cases where young people have been identified as being in trouble and at risk that we have had to be most creative and innovative.

How do we recognise and define "in trouble and at risk"?

For Bryn Melyn Community this definition and distinction has already been made by local authority social services departments prior to placing the young person at Bryn Melyn. Some of the characteristics shared by young people who come to Bryn Melyn are:-

they have suffered sexual abuse
they have suffered physical abuse
they have been neglected or abandoned
they have come from "incomplete" families
they have come from disadvantaged/dysfunctional families
they have not had their needs met by other agencies
(sometimes as many as 14 previous placement breakdowns)

There are many young people who are "in trouble and at risk" in a wide range of circumstances. What is significant is that fewer and fewer of these young people enjoy intervention from caring agencies and more and more find their way into street life, squat living and various forms of deprivation and delinquency.

It is also important that we recognise that some forms of traditional intervention are not effective, and whilst they may temporarily remove a young person from trouble or risk they provide no lasting solution to the problem. For this reason Bryn Melyn Community has moved away from the traditional residential model of care and developed an innovative way of working with individuals which clearly identifies one young person's problems without confusing the issue by immersing him or her in a milieu of several other young people's problems. In this way we provide focused treatment programmes, rather than care packages and in doing so we are working for lasting change and not temporary solutions. In the long run we also believe that this approach is more cost-effective and does break destructive inter-generational family cycles.

For agencies present at this conference who do intervene, it is important that we understand the nature of young people's troubles and the nature of the risk that they are exposed to. We have a rare and valuable opportunity by understanding the task as fully as possible and accepting the implications which that has, especially for staff training and development.

Conclusion

Bryn Melyn Community is using innovative and creative solutions to very old problems. We have met with considerable resistance to our methods, even though we can demonstrate their effectiveness. Both the general public and the present government find it easy to dismiss our work as "holidays for hooligans", "treats for tearaways" and "rewards for thugs". The reality is that in addition to improving the quality of life for abused teenagers, we are demonstrably changing offending behaviour in other adolescents. Without the adventure in our work, without the focus of meaningful activity around which to build programmes, we would not be able to "do" therapy with anybody.

Adventure-based intervention in the form that we use it, works. It is effective. It helps to change behaviour, it alters attitudes and changes values. It is also relatively cheap. It is healthy and it engages young people where other approaches have failed.

We know already, after only two years of working in this way with a small number of young people, that our results are far better than those achieved by the traditional methods of incarceration in Secure Units and Young Offenders Institutions. Although statistically insignificant, when 80% of the young people who complete treatment at Bryn Melyn Community do *not* offend we are encouraged. For those young people who leave Young Offenders Institutions, 80% *do* re-offend. We have identified and are using a method that works and it has much in common with the work that you do.

The people at this conference have a wonderful basic tool or method at their disposal. It is full of potential. When we apply creativity to problems we find solutions. All of us at this conference have in our work an opportunity to find adventure for ourselves in providing adventure for young people. It is a challenge - a word often used in outdoor education - it is an adventure to find solutions to the serious problems that we live with.